

Projects as arenas for pragmatic management practices: Improvisation, capabilities and change

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student: 

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~UT AMEM ET FOVEAM~

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“Arriving at one goal is the starting point to another.”

John Dewey (1859 – 1952)

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Abstract

The purpose of my thesis is to investigate improvisational practices in projects and project-based organisations. Improvisation is a naturally occurring part of our daily actions. Improvisation is not a practice without structure, it is much rather a form of *doing* that utilises existing processes, experiences and other forms of knowledge to make things work if the existing structure fails to produce the aspired outcomes. It is often what practitioners *do* when they face unexpected challenges in their project work. At the same time, I emphasise the importance of existing theories and their underlying processes as potential starting points for improvisational action. Theories therefore become valid tools of practice that should be seen as enablers of practical actions.

The current project environment holds many challenges. Not only is the external environment uncertain, ambiguous and fast moving; the internal structure is becoming increasingly pluralistic and multifaceted. Hence, there is a high level of internal and external complexity. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, the growing number of theories fails to translate into successful project management practices, as a large number of projects still fail to meet their stated objectives. There are numerous reasons that contribute to this problem. However, this doctoral work focuses on the theory-practice division within the field of project management. The multiple theories are not only incompatible; they also lack practical applicability as many propose rational, linear and universal processes. Hence, the practical aspect in regards to practical value and applicability is not sufficiently addressed in current project management theories.

My understanding of improvisation stems from pragmatic philosophy and thus serves as a practical theory that bridges existing project management theories and practical actions. Using a pragmatic mindset, I seek to overcome the distinction between theory and practice. My intention is to show that there is practical value and a level of sophistication in existing project management theories that are often undervalued in practice. Conversely, practitioners can also devalue the importance of good theory. This research uses improvisation to address this practice/theory divide by illustrating that practitioners can use theoretical knowledge as tools of practice that can be applied in multiple ways to solve different problems. My contributions are of practical and theoretical nature and help to develop a more comprehensive and context-dependent theory of project management.